

**Meditation delivered on
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Thoughts on the Vesting of a Priest

It is time for me to enter the holy temple and offer the sacred Eucharist; rather, it is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who will use me to take His place before the holy altar. I pass through the portal into the vestibule and pray: *Lord, I love the beauty of Your house, and the place where Your glory dwells.* I recite my normal morning prayers, followed by twelve special prayers before celebrating the Eucharist. Four more prayers before the holy icons of Jesus Christ and the Theotokos, another to call upon the Lord for a blessing of strength. I enter the sanctuary and I make a full prostration before the holy altar, reciting yet the prayer: *I will enter Your house, I will worship Your holy temple in fear...*

I select the alb or sticharion to be worn. As I take up the sticharion, I recite the excerpt from the Psalms appropriate for this vestment:

“My soul shall rejoice in the Lord, for He has clothed me with the garment of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of gladness; as a bridegroom He has set a crown on me; and as a bride adorns herself with jewels, so has He adorned me.”

And as I raise it up over my head and let it slip down over my torso to the top of my shoes, I reflect on my ordination. I think of being vested by the ordaining hierarch, and I recall the words of our Savior: *‘You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you.’* (Jn. 15:16) And I consider the honor and dignity bestowed upon me, an insignificant sinner. I am chosen to be the host of the gathering in the place of Christ. No, He is not absent; however, He cannot be present in the same way that He was at the Last Supper. He has through the holy Church assigned me in the Holy Spirit to represent Him. And it is in the Eucharist where I am doing so. *Evcharisto.* I am giving thanks, and to do so I must be full of joy. As in the prayer of Vespers, *‘as much as I am able,’* to my intellectual and spiritual capacity I shall express the delight in my heart for all the blessings the Lord Jesus has won for us, the redeemed flock called by His Name.

“I will rejoice in the Lord”

Because I am in the Lord, and His Holy Spirit in me, I can do no other than to celebrate. I will rejoice, because I feel the emotion of the apostles gathered in the Upper Room on the day of mankind’s liberation.

I will rejoice because today replicates that day when our Lord Jesus appeared among His apostles, huddled in fear and confusion, and said *“Peace be with you.” Shalom!*

I will rejoice, because Christ is risen in me, and there is no room for darkness, despair, doubt or self-reflection, mulling over my selfish personal interests.

I will rejoice. I will myself to rejoice and conquer all tendencies to depression and sadness. These are inappropriate to the mood of salvation. Those who come to honor the Lord and to be uplifted by the Holy Spirit gaze at me. They will stare into my face to discover what the happiness of one who knows the euphoria of salvation will look like. They are my spiritual children, and like an infant who falls and bruises himself postpones the moment of wailing until he runs to his mother's arms, so conversely my attitude sends signals to those who reckon me as their spiritual leader. My emotions will be theirs.

I will rejoice, though I am underpaid and undervalued in my parish. Even though that be true, nevertheless I am more than adequately compensated by the Lord Jesus Himself, who has honored me with the privilege of representing Him among His people.

I will rejoice, though my fellow priests and hierarch may misunderstand me. This is not the moment for self-pity or self-indulgence. I am no Hamlet. I am called to be a saint.

I will rejoice, because I am my Lord Jesus' stand-in, and joy is the only way in which He greets those He loves. How else can He offer traditional oriental hospitality, except in me? And what good am I, if I do not personify the exuberance of the redeemed?

I will rejoice, because He cannot be here in the flesh, as He was during His ministry, and He wants His guests at this spiritual banquet to feel His delight at their presence I will rejoice because all who have come to the celebration of life look to me and at me for the signals that express the emotions proper to honor the event.

I will rejoice because it is for me to make this a unique event, never allowing the sacred and precious Divine Liturgy to become routine. If any are bored it's my blame and my shame. Celebrated properly, none should want to return home at the conclusion.

I will rejoice, because I have been ordained, designated to bear and transmit the grace of the Holy Spirit to those whom He has selected to share the sacred Meal I will rejoice, because as Master of Ceremonies it is my responsibility to make this sacred gathering a triumph and an achievement, so that the assembled people of God will go through the week recalling the delight of the event and yearn for the next celebration I will rejoice, because after agape love, joy follows in the ranks of the fruit of the Spirit, and the delight shining from my face is the evidence that the fruit of the Spirit bursts forth among the people of God. The most severe, challenging and distressing indictment from Christ's detractors, expressed by Fredrich Nietzsche: "*Christians are a sad, sorrowful joyless people.*" That is not true, and I am an example that refutes that charge.

I may be a young priest recently ordained, still uncomfortable regarding my position, lacking confidence as to the rhythm of liturgy and the manner in which I am to represent the Lord Jesus Christ but I will rejoice, and I shall conquer my inner trepidations.

I may feel out of place among so many of foreign extraction, ill at ease when I hear conversation in an alien tongue, yet I will rejoice, knowing that the Spirit of Pentecost has made all of these differences in traditions and customs moot.

I may be caught in the net of Satan, struggling with sins too shameful to confess even to my spiritual father, knowing that my secret vice is known to Him whom I serve, wrestling with my conscience, putting on a face that is not my true persona, wondering where I am going, feeling ever more alone and alienated--still I am somehow before the Lord at His sacred altar, and despite my worthless self and shameful soul I will rejoice.

I may be a convert, raised in a spiritual environment quite different, even diametrically opposed to the Apollonian majesty and traditional solemnity of the Orthodox Church, yet I will rejoice in being found worthy of the holy priesthood, and do all with the Spirit's promptings to manifest the dignity and honor of being Christ's celebrant.

Though I may feel that I have so much to offer and so few who appreciate what I know and who I am, with degrees and doctorates, wisdom gleaned from several languages, stuck in an intellectual swamp among those whose knowledge comes only from the daily papers and television, I will rejoice, knowing that I am serving God as His priest, and trusting in the Spirit to make the seeds grow that I go on patiently scattering.

Though I may be old, weary, worn out from struggling to prevent the young families from leaving the parish and recognizing what appears to be the death rattle of the church, with constant worry over personal debts and bills due, my health failing and my retirement uncertain, out of touch with the modern world, preaching to people who keep looking at their wristwatches, nevertheless I am God's servant and Christ's ambassador, and I will rejoice though my soul is crying out for relief.

“He has clothed me with the robe of salvation”

A child's question, yet disarming in its simplicity: What does salvation look like?

And I have no response except to repeat what St. Paul said: *‘Look at me.’* And yet how dare I make such a bold statement? What sort of role model am I?

Whatever it takes to be saved ought to be recognized in my white sticharion—not the sticharion *per se*, but in the one who wears it. Look at me and you should see:

1. Purity; Somebody pure in heart, or at least struggling to make it pure with the help of the Holy Spirit, not yet ‘seeing God’ but peering through the mist.
2. Serenity; A man who has made some progress in calming the waves of inner turbulence, knowing that I cannot make my fingers in the ICXC letters and bless the believers if I have no peace of my own to send forth.
3. Kindness. I must be a man who labors to identify with all others, and to work through prejudices and judgment of all who pass through my world.

4. Goodness. If the Lord and Master Himself asked of the rich young man “*Why do you call Me good? There is but One who is good,*” (Mt. 19:17) how dare I pin that label on my chest? Nevertheless, I shall spend this lifetime struggling to do what is good and right.

5. Faith. The priest must epitomize one who wears the white robe of those who have been baptized into Christ, having put on Christ, being drowned to the world and alive to the Kingdom. I am trustworthy. Rely on me. If that doesn’t describe me, then I should take it off and find out who I really am.

6. Hope. I am one who holds out an invisible rope, yelling to all who are perishing to take hold to the other end, because I am on firm ground. I will pull them out of the waves in which they are drowning. If I am not the means of hope, I am a fraud.

7. Patience. I can say with Chrysostom that I am a man who can revenge myself, but will not, because like my Lord, I am slow to wrath.

8. But most of all, I am a man filled with the same *agape* love possessed by my Lord, and of course the great joy *charis* referred to earlier.

“He has set a crown on my head like a bridegroom”

It’s obvious that if I wear a crown, albeit invisible crown, I must be able to hold my head up high and live with the dignity of spiritual nobility. I am already at least proleptically among those whom the Apostle and Evangelist John witnessed in heaven [Rev. 4] forming a circle around the Throne.

The crown is another example of my standing in the place of the Lord Jesus Himself, and bearing in mind all that St. Paul expects from the bridegroom in relation to his spouse. I must be ever prepared to lay down my life for the Church. I have no right to act like an employee looking at the Church Council as my employer, ungrateful for their lack of concern over my good work. I am shepherd of the flock, I am the husbandman of the olive orchard, I am the overseer of the field, I am appointed by my hierarch to be in charge of the spiritual flock entrusted to me, and I am responsible to my Lord.

The Church Council may be a cluster of miserly miserable losers caring for little except finances, knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing; nevertheless it is I who bear responsibility for Christ’s Church. When the Greeks [Jn. 12:20] inaugurated the Lord’s pilgrimage to the Cross by asking Philip: “*We would like to see Jesus,*” audacious as it may seem, that same question put today has to be answered: “*Look at me.*”

I represent Christ to the people of God entrusted to my care.

I represent Christ to the community outside the parish.

I represent the people of God to Christ, and Christ to the people of God.

Does this great privilege weigh me down? Is the burden too heavy? Is this tremendous responsibility a cause for grief and depression? Not at all! He Himself said:

“Take My yoke upon you, for My burden is easy, and My yoke is light.”

I am nothing; but Christ and I are champions.

I represent Christ to the people, and I stand before them as the face of the Church to Christ. I am as radiant as a bride on her wedding day. Here is an appropriate simile for happiness! I dare say that dressed as I am in the robe of salvation I am as beautiful as a bride, if beauty is measured not by outward appearance, but by the radiance of the heart. I am the model of a saint in the Kingdom of God. I am filled with joy, because He has selected me like a monarch choosing a bride for His son among the women of his realm. Nothing is able to dampen my spirits. Nobody, no event, no negative news can possibly blunt my enthusiasm, because the Holy Spirit has made a halo of my happiness. Enthusiasm is the definition of my emotions, and it radiates from my face. You will find the grace of my ordination day and the Holy Spirit emanating from my prayers, my readings, my bearing, my homilies, and my outreach. People come to Church to be uplifted by my excitement—at least I strive to make it so.

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, Aaron’s beard...”

Blessed is God who pours out on His priests ointment running down the beard, the beard of Aaron, flowing down to the hem of his garment.” (Ps. 133)

I take up the stole, or epitrahelion, and as I raise it over my head and allow the opening to pass over the crown of my head and rest on my neck, I recall the stages of my progress to priesthood, from sub-deacon to deacon, to the noble dignity of the priesthood. Two images come to mind: I am not alone. Not only, if I dare put it like this, am I in the presence of the Lord Jesus Himself who has chosen to yoke me to the plow that is to turn over the world’s hard earth and make it fertile for the gospel seed of His word, but I am given membership in the holy priesthood of all in the lineage of Aaron. Yes I, a gentile, by the grace of the Lord am numbered among Christ’s priests. I am united in time and space—backwards through the lists of all whom the Orthodox Church has blessed to serve in this sacred dignity, and throughout the world, together with all who that very morning are slipping the epitrahelion over their heads as they vest to serve the Lord. We are *syndesmos*—*sobran’e*. Fellowship. Separate in locales, churches and altars, we are at the same time one earthly choir singing the hymns of salvation, joy, love and peace on all continents.

I am blessed in reminding myself of the blessings of God and of the only Source of blessings. If He honors me with the dignity of standing at His holy altar in the place of all true and righteous priests in the line of Aaron, who am I to demean or denigrate this hallowed office? The grace of being ordained, chosen by anointment that pours down on my head and gives me precious gifts of the Holy Spirit:

Wisdom, Knowledge, Discernment, Understanding, Discretion, Piety, Humility, and Guiltlessness. How do those precious gifts find me, the ignorant sinner? Do they come with the precious unguent onto my head and flow downward to my heart? Are they like the *logoi spermatikoi* that the ancient fathers speak of? They come to me more as a challenge than reward, for they are a constant reminder that only through prayer, study, contemplation and fasting shall I obtain a modicum of any of them. Yet I press on, opening my mind and heart to His great gifts that enable me to be His servant.

I wear the yoke of Christ because I know that it will be easy on my shoulders, yet weighed down with responsibility. Easy, because I need only keep my eyes on Christ, follow His Way, and look not to the right or left, nor especially behind. The Master will be certain to feed me with material, intellectual and spiritual food, as I am ready to accept it, washing me with the purity that cleanses me from sin, and energizes me. He loves me more than I can ever love myself, much less return His love with my own, and I want to plow His fields, break the clods beneath my feet and fertilize the earth with His gospel. I can never do enough to repay His love for me.